Historic England

Farmstead and Landscape Statement

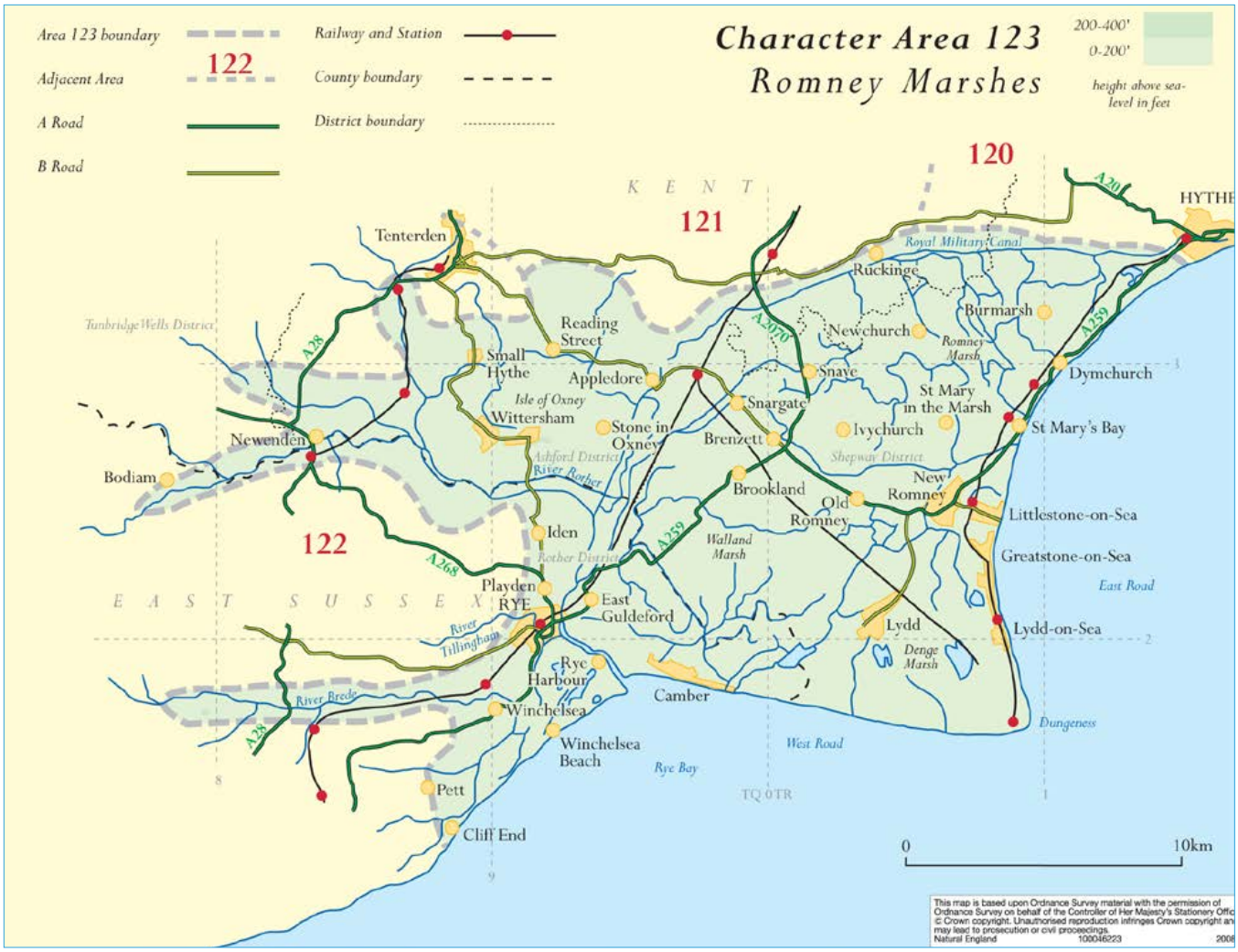
Romney Marshes

NATIONAL CHARACTER AREA 123

Introduction

The Farmstead and Landscape Statements will help you to identify the historic character of traditional farmsteads and their buildings in all parts of England, and how they relate to their surrounding landscapes. They are now available for all of England's National Character Areas (NCAs), and should be read in conjunction with the NCA profiles which have been produced by Natural England using a wide range of environmental information (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-character-area-profiles-data-for-local-decision-making/national-character-area-profiles). Each Farmstead and Landscape Statement is supported by Historic England's advice on farm buildings (https://historicengland.org.uk/farmbuildings), which provides links to the ***National Farmsteads Character Statement***, national guidance on Farm Building Types and a fully-sourced summary in the ***Historic Farmsteads: Preliminary Character Statements***. It also forms part of additional research on historic landscapes, including the mapping of farmsteads in some parts of England (see https://historicengland.org.uk/characterisation).

Front cover: The landscape of the higher ground in the west of the area is similar in character to the High Weald with scattered farmsteads, many retaining pre-1700 houses and some barns, lying within fields with large hedges and areas of woodland. Photo © Bob Edwards



This map shows the Romney Marshes, with the numbers of neighbouring National Character Areas around it. The key area sub-divisions are:

1. The high ground to the west which is adjacent to the Weald and includes the Isle of Oxney and the raised area around Appledore, where farmsteads are generally larger, with older buildings. This area includes villages such as Wittersham and except where the land falls into the valleys that encircle the Isle of Oxney, the landscape and farmsteads have more affinity with the High Weald.
2. The flat marshlands, with small-scale farmsteads. Farmsteads in the marshland part of the area have been subject to higher rates of loss of farmstead character than those on the higher ground.

Summary

See the National Farmsteads Character Statement for a short introduction to the headings below, including maps and tables.

The Romney Marshes are an area of reclaimed, low-lying, open marshland mainly in Kent but also stretching into East Sussex. The area is bound to the south and east by the English Channel and to the north and west by upstanding, old sea cliffs. They form a remote, horizontal landscape of open agricultural land crossed by drainage dykes and marshes and dominated by the sky. In contrast to the reclaimed marshes, there are also extensive shingle beaches at Dungeness and small areas of sand dunes at Camber Sands. The area is distinctive for its open character and absence of woodland (0.8%). The urban area is just 3.9%. About 28% of the area falls within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Historic character

- There are low densities of dispersed, small to medium-scale farmsteads within a landscape reclaimed from coastal marsh, with villages concentrated on the higher ground to the north.

Significance

- Of the farmsteads in this area, 61% retain some farmstead character but only 34% retain more than 50% of their historic form based on c.1900 Ordnance Survey mapping, making this one of the areas with the highest levels of change recorded in the south-east of England.
- Of the farmsteads, 16.5% retain a pre-1700 farmhouse and 2.2% a pre-1700 working building. Just 1.1% of farmsteads have both a pre-1700 farmhouse and working building, whilst 15.7% of farmsteads have an 18th-century farmhouse, but post-1700 working buildings are uncommon. Farmsteads with listed buildings are concentrated within the areas of higher ground to the west.
- Dispersed-plan farmsteads associated with small-scale holdings were common but are now very rare,
- Surviving field barns, sheep folds and ‘lookers’ huts’ for shepherds are an important reminder of the importance of sheep in the history of this area.
- Reed thatch was probably a common roofing material but is now very rare on farm buildings.

Present and future issues

- In this National Character Area, the Photo Image Project (2006) recorded a high proportion of listed working farm buildings converted to non-agricultural use (62.5%, the national average being 32%). It also recorded one of the highest percentages of listed farm buildings with visible structural failure (above 20%, the national average being 8.9%) in England, contrasting with the majority of

south-eastern England (except the Thames Estuary) where the rates are low.

Historic development

- Until the first century AD, the area was a shallow bay with settlement upon its numerous, small islands, and the Marshes were created by the natural deposition of sediment and the reclamation of the area for agricultural use.
- Reclamation from the 8th century was driven by individual farmers from settlements on higher ground and alongside roads.
- Estates based outside the area exploited its resources, and in the 12th and 13th centuries local abbeys drove much of the reclamation of Romney Marshes for agriculture.
- Rye developed as a port serving the Weald, through which local produce could be exported to London. Flooding in the 13th and 14th centuries and French attacks resulted in the shrinkage and abandonment of some settlements in the marshes, leaving some abandoned moated sites and churches, and created a greater emphasis on grazing. The principal later phases of reclamation and flood defences occurred in the 16th, 19th and mid- 20th centuries.
- The flat, open areas provided rich grazing land, particularly for sheep, and it was considered that there were more sheep per acre on the Romney Marshes than anywhere else in England. Cattle, brought in from surrounding areas, were also fattened on the marshes.
- Further drainage works from the mid-19th century and especially the 1950s facilitated the widespread conversion to arable on the productive loam soils, although stock grazing persists in some areas of the marsh.

Landscape and settlement

- Settlement predominantly consists of dispersed farmsteads with a few small villages and hamlets. Shepherding was the main occupation of communities and there were few if any landed families, the area being relatively poor.
- The irregular, small and medium-sized fields of Romney Marsh are almost entirely bounded by drainage ditches rather than hedges and there are very few trees. Shelter belts of willows are planted around many farmsteads.
- Rectangular fields are the result of more organised reclamation or the reorganisation of drainage.
- Low-lying levels have large farmsteads on raised ground.

- There is some nucleated settlement on the higher land, with steep valleys to the north of the area bordering the Weald, including on the Isle of Oxney and the raised area around Appledore surrounding Shirley, where there is more tree cover and orchards.

Farmstead and building types

The area has a low survival of pre-19th-century working farm buildings.

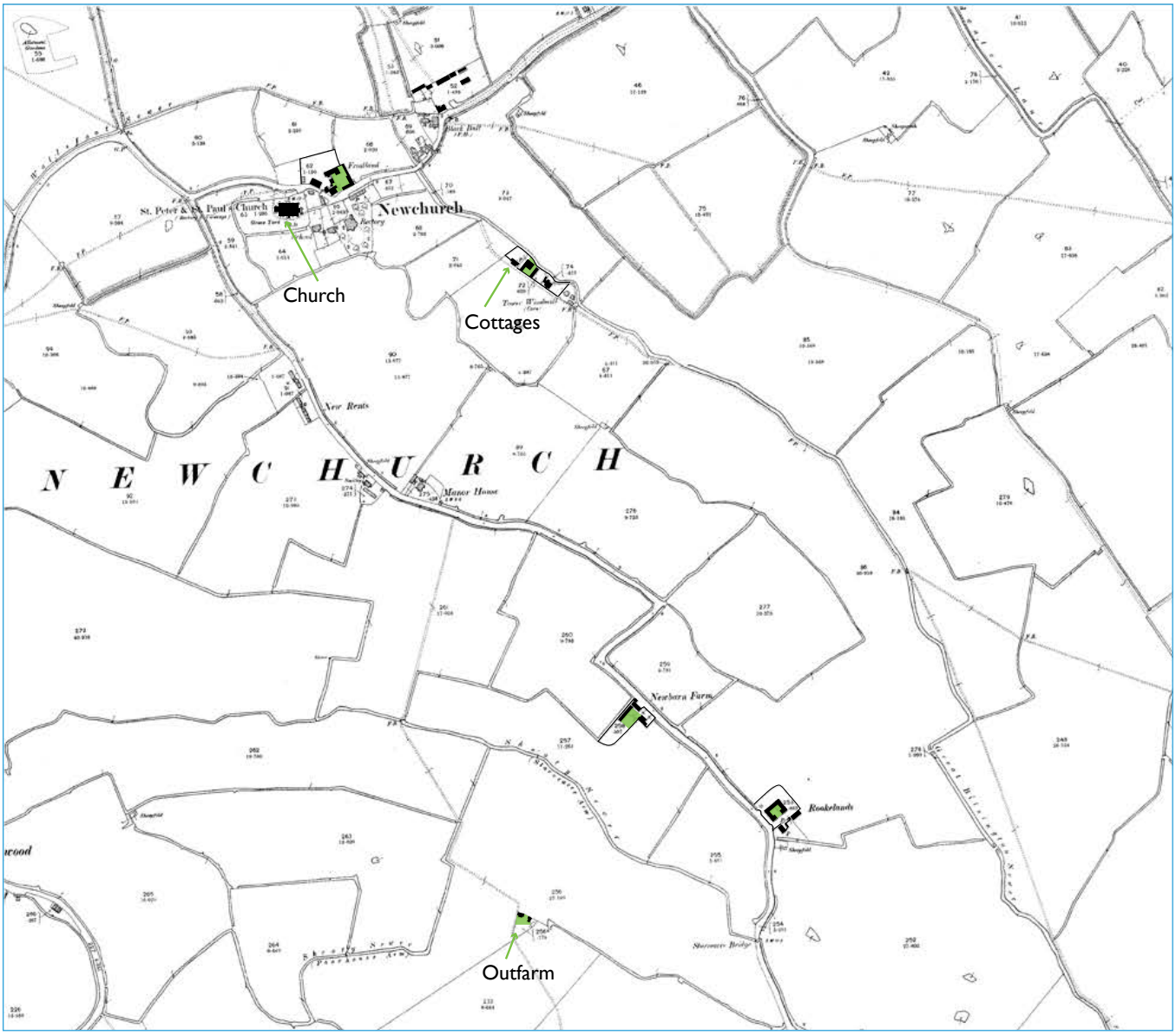
Farmstead types

- There is low survival of pre-1750 farmstead buildings, mainly threshing barns and farmhouses.
- Farmsteads are 19th-century, small to medium-scale, regular L- and U-plan.

Building types

- There is a small number of timber-framed threshing barns.
- Buildings for cattle are of 19th- and 20th-century date.
- Lookers' huts for sheep are a highly distinctive feature, and many sheepfolds are marked on historic Ordnance Survey maps.

A large, isolated, farmstead lying within the flat marshland area. The farmstead has a five-bay, aisled threshing barn forming part of a loose courtyard group, with the 18th or early 19th-century farmhouse detached from the yard. Here, the large, modern sheds have been built to the side of the historic yard; often such sheds have replaced the earlier buildings. Photo © Bob Edwards



Maps are based on 2nd edition 25" Ordnance Survey maps, which show farmsteads after the last major phase in the building of traditional farmsteads in England. © Crown Copyright [and database rights] 2020. OS 100024900

Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.

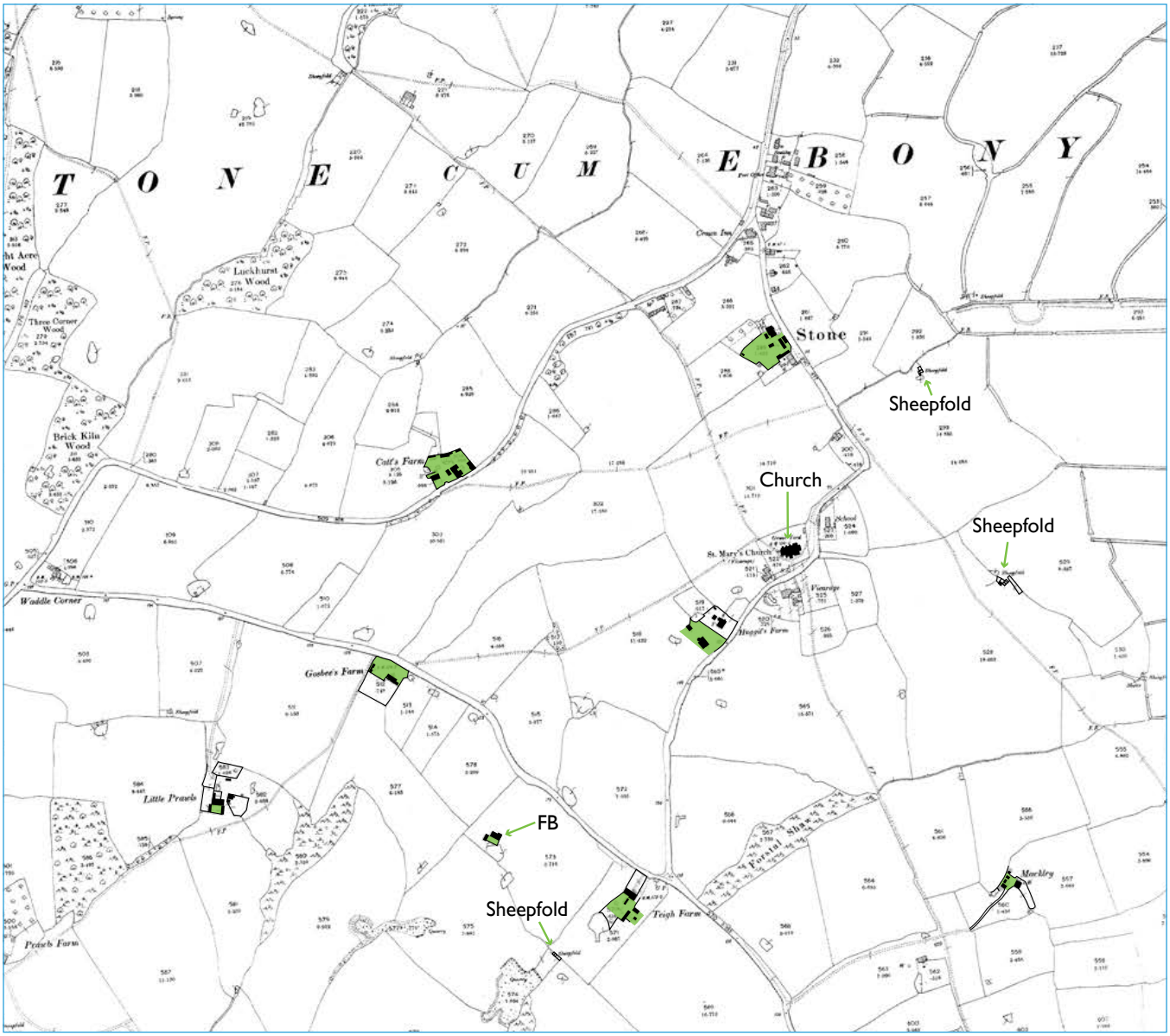
0 250 500 m

0 0.25 miles

N

Newchurch

Newchurch is a hamlet within the marshes consisting of the parish church, the rectory, a public house, two farms and a few cottages. It probably represents a shrunken village. The fields surrounding the settlement are almost all defined by ditches rather than hedges or fences, although some blocks of land are also marked by banks to prevent flooding. The few boundaries shown probably mark later sub-division of fields. Much of the pattern of drainage ditches creating these fields was established in the medieval period with some later modifications. In addition to the farms within Newchurch, there were isolated farmsteads: some of these retain pre-1700 buildings, showing that the dispersed settlement pattern was established by that date. Whilst dispersed and loose courtyard plans were common (the photo shows a loose courtyard plan with buildings to three sides of the yard), many of these farmsteads had been rebuilt or remodelled as regular courtyard plans by the end of the 19th century, typically regular L- and U-plans. The regular plans were associated with further improvements in drainage, which allowed conversion of pasture to arable.



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Farmstead, showing the buildings in black and the boundaries of the main yards (highlighted in green), working areas and gardens.

Stone

Stone is a small, scattered settlement on an area of higher ground in the west of the Character Area. This area is effectively an 'island' of higher ground with the marshland stretching to the east and flat valley bottoms, also reclaimed marsh, to the north, west and south. In this part of the Character Area, hedges, often large and well-wooded, bound the irregular fields that were created through clearance of woodland and piecemeal enclosure. The enclosure of this landscape was probably complete by the 16th century. The scattered farmsteads within this landscape were typically of loose courtyard or dispersed plan, usually dispersed clusters as at Catt's and Huggit's Farms with some dispersed multi-yards. Field barns were also a feature of this landscape. Research has shown that occasionally they may represent the sites of former farmsteads.

Small, dispersed cluster plans were common in this area and often consisted of the farmhouse and a barn. Here, a second, later building has been added, developing the farmstead into a loose courtyard plan. Photo © Bob Edwards

A view from the flat marshland towards a farmstead in Wittersham, the hipped roof to the barn being clearly visible. Photo © Bob Edwards

A large courtyard farmstead overlooking the marshes. The conical roof of the kiln of the oast house is a prominent feature of the group. Photo © Bob Edwards

A three-bay threshing barn of 16th- to 17th-century date, with an outshot to one end probably providing animal housing. This barn has been restored with wattle infill to the upper panels of the framing. Stave holes in the framing are usually all that remain as evidence for such infill. Any surviving examples will be extremely rare and significant. Photo © Bob Edwards

The dominance of the mass of the roof over the walling is an important characteristic of aisled barns. This five-bay barn has timber-framing to the aisle walls and brick to the roadside gable, possibly reflecting a re-build. The other end of the barn has a hipped roof. Photo © Bob Edwards

This 19th-century, five-bay barn is typical of the period, with its shallow-pitched, half-hipped roof and lack of aisles. The door at first-floor level in the gable suggests the possible presence of a loft at this end of the building. Photo © Bob Edwards

The often limited extent of arable land meant that many farms needed only small teams of horses, so stables are typically correspondingly small. This example with a hayloft over is late 18th- or early 19th-century in date. Photo © Bob Edwards

Cattle housing was common on most farms and usually took the form of open-fronted shelter sheds, either as ranges around a yard or attached to the side of a barn. These additions contribute to the character of the farmstead and the barn. Photo © Bob Edwards

Farms in this area, particularly those on the higher ground to the west and those fringing the marshland, were involved in the hop industry and small oast houses are a common feature. Photo © Bob Edwards

Some examples of 20th-century oast houses survive and can contribute to the character of a farmstead group, especially if associated with earlier buildings associated with the hop industry. Photo © Bob Edwards

Larger field barns and outfarms were not a major feature of this area, but small buildings that provided shelter for sheep and possibly storage of fodder were common, together with sheep folds. Many have been lost from the landscape. Photo © Bob Edwards

Small hovels called 'lookers' huts' provided shelter for shepherds tending the large flocks of sheep that were grazed on the marshes. Surviving examples of these small buildings are now rare. Photo © Bob Edwards

Materials and detail

- There are some timber-framed buildings of medieval date with exposed framing, but typically the framing is either clad in white-painted weatherboarding or is tile hung.
- Brick is the predominant walling material across the area.
- Roofs are commonly plain clay tile and hipped roofs are characteristic, being the dominant roof form used until the 19th century.
- Reed thatch was probably a common roofing material but is now very rare on farm buildings.

Historic England

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